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Description

The NBC Learn series, "Finishing the Dream" continues in Jackson, Mississippi, where civil rights activist James Meredith, the first African American to attend the University of Mississippi, talks about the experience.

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Transcript

Finishing the Dream: Learning from the Civil Rights Era – Jackson Town Hall (part 3)

Who is following in James Meredith’s footsteps?

HOWARD BALLOU, Anchor: Welcome back. September 30, 1962, the campus of the University of Mississippi looked like a war zone. And, by all accounts, it was a battlefield. For hours U.S. Marshals held off bomb-wielding rioters with tear gas and brute force. When the smoke cleared two were dead and several more injured. The reason for the brutal battle: integration.

The following day, James Meredith became the first African-American ever to be enrolled at Ole Miss. In 2007, the University that fought so hard to keep him out, honored Meredith and the trail he blazed for future students of that school.

LESTER HOLT, NBC NEWS: [IN CLIP] In a ceremony some thought they would never see in their lifetime, it honors the courage of one man who took on a school and a system and helped changed the nation. Here's NBC's Martin Savidge.

Unidentified Man #1: [IN CLIP] You refuse to permit us to come in through the door.

Governor ROSS BARNETT: [IN CLIP] Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

Man #1: [IN CLIP] All right, governor. Thank you.

Governor ROSS BARNETT: [IN CLIP] I do that politely.

MARTIN SAVIDGE: [IN CLIP] In 1962 James Meredith wanted to go to the University of Mississippi. Because he was black, it took Federal marshals and troops to get him there. The riot that followed left two people dead.

Offscreen Voice: [IN CLIP] It started first with rocks and soda pop bottles being thrown at the marshals. They retaliated, firing tear gas...

SAVIDGE: [IN CLIP] The doors of Ole Miss were finally opened for all.

Mr. JAMES MEREDITH: [IN CLIP] I should hope that the outcome will affect a whole lot of people.
SAVIDGE: [IN CLIP] Today Meredith returned 44 years later, triggering not rage but reflection. Representative JOHN LEWIS (Democrat, Georgia): [IN CLIP] Because of individuals like James Meredith and many others, we have come a great distance in this country toward laying down the burden of race.

SAVIDGE: [IN CLIP] Hundreds gathered for the unveiling of a monument dedicated to the civil rights movement. (Statue unveiled)

Unidentified Man #3: [IN CLIP] James Meredith.

SAVIDGE: [IN CLIP] It includes a life-size bronze likeness of Meredith standing in front of a doorway.

Mr. MEREDITH: [IN CLIP] All right.

SAVIDGE: [IN CLIP] I asked him if he felt he'd done enough for the cause of civil rights. To answer, he quoted another famous Mississippi son, William Faulkner.

Mr. MEREDITH: [IN CLIP] “The past is never dead. It's not even past. It's all now, you see. Because yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began 10,000 years ago.”

SAVIDGE: [IN CLIP] But today it was about the past, as James Meredith was finally able to come face to face with what he'd done. Open doors, so that others could forever follow. Martin Savidge, NBC. Oxford, Mississippi.

BALLOU: And we’re so fortunate--so fortunate, so fortunate to have Mr. Meredith with us here today. And Mr. Meredith, I know you probably get tired of me saying this, but Maggie and I would not be doing what we’re doing today if it weren’t for people like you who blazed the trail for us. Your thoughts on where we are today.

JAMES MEREDITH, First African American to Enroll at University of Mississippi: Well, I appreciate all of that. But quite frankly, I am extremely disappointed, particularly in myself, as what has happened over the last forty or fifty years from that. Because the reality is that we are giving less opportunity to the people who we acknowledged then we were denying opportunity to.

I think I have come to the solution to our current education problem, and I got a one-minute summary that I want to read.

The truth is that moral and common sense training is equally important to the ABCs and the 123s. Only the Christian church, God’s family, can provide this training in each and every Mississippi community. The Christian family consists of two parts in Mississippi--the white church and the black church. We all like to pretend that don’t exist. The education problem in Mississippi can be made right by these two bodies working together to train up the children of Mississippi. I’m fully convinced that I’m going to spend the rest of my life trying to get black Christians and white Christians to do their part, to educate our children from birth on up.

BALLOU: We have a questioner who would like to ask you a question.

CHANDLER JONES: Good afternoon, my name is Chandler Jones. I’m a junior Chemistry major here at Jackson State University, and my question is for Mr. Meredith. As the first and the only African American at that time to enroll at the University of Mississippi, I would like to know why did you enroll and what did you hoped to accomplish.

Mr. MEREDITH: And for the first time I’m going to tell the whole truth. I always thought that God put
me here for a purpose. As a young man, I was ashamed to say that, but I’ve always known it was true. And it didn’t take a genius to figure out up that blacks didn’t enjoy all their rights and privileges of citizenship. So, basically that’s what it was about. Another part I want to answer is the thing about life and fear. God gave life to human beings through the word of the truth. So, consequently, as I understood the truth then, I did not have life. I was a dead person. I was doing what I was doing in order to live. So, everybody was talking about how brave I was, scared they going to kill me. To me, it was more than worth the price because what I was doing was seeking life. I mean, so, I’m going to get off this philosophy. I hope that answers your question. MAGGIE WADE, Anchor: Another question please. UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Thank you for all of your sacrifices and your contributions. My question is what can you all do to help black people learn how to nurture their children to have better families so we can produce better communities? And any one can answer that. Dr. JOHN M. PERKINS, Founder, John M. Perkins Foundation for Reconciliation and Development: Well, you-- you ought to come over and visit us at the Perkins Center. Because one of the things that I’m doing is monthly bringing 25 different black men together and trying to teach them how to be men and fathers. I think we know the problem. We know there is connection between the fact that 97 percent of the prison population comes from homes where there is no father. So, the only solution for that is to develop fathers. WADE: Doctor Perkins, I hate to interrupt you, but we do have a student who wants to ask a question. RACHAEL WILLIS: My name is Rachael Willis, and I’ll be a senior at the University of Mississippi this year, and I have a question for Mr. Meredith. Do you think that today, African American students feel completely comfortable applying to and attending Ole Miss? And if not what else can we do to achieve that? Mr. MEREDITH: Well, to tell you the truth, I’ve talked to a lot of students recently, including recent graduates, and it is clear to them they are not comfortable. And frankly, I think answering the last lady’s question about the family and your question is the same. We’re going to have to build from the bottom up. Any child that reached the second grade and cannot read, and that’s nine out of ten black males, is never—is very rarely—going to succeed at Ole Miss, or at Jackson State, or anywhere else. So that’s where we’re going to have to start doing, and whether we like it or not we’re going to have to do it. WADE: Thank you Mister Meredith. Up next, a case of justice delayed but not denied.